

SUBJECT: History of the Latvian Military Unit in the Second World War.

Re: - H.Q. IRO at Lengo.

On 1.2.1949, by order of the HQ. IRO Mr Scheuring interviewed me and asked me, as former Chief of Staff of the General Inspection of the Latvian Legion to prepare for the HQ the history of Latvian Military Units in Second World War.

I am very sorry that during my detention as prisoner of war my diary is being lost.

There are very few documents and written materials at my disposal and the time granted me for the performance of my task is too short to procure some detailed information from my colleagues in the office and in the field. I have put down my memoirs mostly from memory and it is possible that there have happened some mistakes regarding dates and figures.

It is universally known that the 3 Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, were occupied, contrary to International Law in June 1940 by the Soviet Union, and were incorporated into the Soviet Union. Immediately after the occupation there began an indelible terror, oppression of personal liberty, as well as of economic activity. An outsider who has not experienced this personally might not be able to understand it. I do not regard it necessary to lay down details of this regime of Terror because they have been elucidated well enough in the international press. Of course this inhuman terror has created simultaneously a secret movement of resistance in the Latvian people. Many persons were compelled, in order to escape persecution especially after the mass deportation on June 13/14, 1941 of Latvian citizens of all classes and professions, to hide in forests and moors. They were mostly members of the army, police, and of the home guard of the former Latvian Republic, who were being struck most heavily by the bolshevistic terror. When on 22.6.1941 a war between Germany and the Soviet Union broke loose, the Latvian people longing for liberty and independence, regarded this moment welcome to free itself from the bolshevistic supremacy. Patriots who had fled into forests and moors began an enthusiastic struggle against the hated occupational power. Thus began an essential guerilla movement under leadership of officers of the former Latvian Army. The Latvian population hoped, after the advancement of the German Army to see the resurrection of their independence. Indeed, in the first days of the advancement of the German Army into Latvia this Army demonstrated a seeming benevolence towards the aspirations of the Latvian people. Its members entered into contact with Latvian guerillas and formed in many places of the liberated areas along with German "Commandanturas" also Latvian ones and appointed as their Chiefs mostly officers of the guerilla movement.

In addition to the task of clearing of the territory of scattered soldiers of the Red Army these "commandanturas" /provost-marshals/ had tasks only of upkeeping order, usually performed by police force.

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This benevolent attitude of Germans was however not of long duration. As soon as the "Chief of the SS and Police" /SS und Polizeiführer/ for Latvia arrived in Riga in mid-July, a reorganisation of the Latvian Police force began. It was strongly forbidden to wear uniforms of the former Latvian Republic. The existing Latvian commandanturas were transformed: in larger cities Prefectures were established, and in rural districts District police boards were set up. The Latvian Police were charged only with police duties as fixed in the existing laws.

Besides this police force consisting of individual policemen there were organised in the second half of July 1941 in towns closed police units to guard important objects; auxiliary policemen were charged with such duties in rural districts. The so-called auxiliary policemen of the group "C" were recruited from among the members of the Home-Guard of the former Latvian Republic. They continued to do their usual work and were called forward only in cases of need, e.g. for short-termed wachmans service, actions against bandits etc.

When late in the autumn in 1941 the German advance in Russia stopped and the Germans turned to trench warfare they began to put Latvian police units in action, although the latter had enlisted only for police service and only in the home-country. Everyman at his enrolment in the police force had to sign an obligation for one year. But when after the lapse of this term the persons enlisted wanted to resign their post in the police force, it appeared that according to an order of the highest leader of the SS and the Police in Ostland SS-Gruppenführer and General of the Police Jeckeln they were regarded as bound for military service till the end of the war. These unlawful measures of the Germans created great embitterment among the local population and resulted in disparition of many members of these police units. Such persons were now regarded by German Authorities as deserters and were court-martialed as such by the Germans. Many of them were sentenced to death and their number was not inconsiderable. They were granted no lenience although they were no soldiers. As time passed the German East front required reserve forces in growing number. Now the Germans encroached also on the auxiliary policemen of the group C. These persons who had enlisted themselves only as policemen in extraordinary cases and only in near-st vicinity of their homes, were already in the second half of the year 1942 formed in units and brought to Leningrad for trench-digging. When they were called forward they were promised to remain there only 6 weeks. Nevertheless this promise was not kept by the German authorities too. After the digging of trenches they were not discharged but were caused to take part in action in that same place. This behavior of the Germans caused still greater embitterment the more so because it was the choice part of Latvian population that had volunteered for the auxiliary police service, such as farm-owners, dairy managers, teachers, notaries etc. After their departure here respective rural districts became unsafe and the farms were often victims of thefts and robberies. Separate bolshevist guerillas also made the districts, devoid of self-protection, unsafe. Such were the conditions in Latvia in 1942/43 when the great turn in the warfare on the Eastern front,

owing to the German catastrophes at Stalingrad took place.

On 18.2.1943 the German Minister for Propaganda Goebbels pronounced at the Sportplatz in Berlin his well known 10 questions to the German people, and extorted from the German people the answer that they wished a total war. In accordance with the plan of total warfare the 3 Baltic States had also to be involved. The Germans planned to enlist for action and also for auxiliary service for the troupes. But as among the Latvian people there reigned already a deep embitterment against the German occupation policy, there was no prospect that the Latvian people might voluntarily take part at a total warfare. For this reason the German occupation power resolved to effectuate a compulsory mobilization. The order of Adolf Hitler as of 10.2.43 regarding the formation of a Latvian SS voluntary Legion must be inter alia regarded as the first measure towards realization of this plan /v. Annex 1/.

This order was a total surprise. As far as I am informed on the part of Latvians no offer regarding the formation of a Legion or something of this kind has ever been made.

Notwithstanding many protests and objections of the Latvians against the nomination "Voluntary" and especially against the subordination of the Legion under the Waffen SS which circumstances, as it is to be seen from my statement is not conforming to the real state of matters, the Germans stuck to their resolution and to the official denomination: "Latvian SS Voluntary Legion".

The word "voluntary" has been chosen by the Germans on purpose with the aim to veil their action of compulsory recruitment which is contrary to the International Law.

As regards the subordination under the SS and consequently the nomination SS itself these actions were a pure formal matter. Latvians, being citizens of the Latvian Republic, and they regard themselves as such up till now, could not be compulsorily incorporated into the German Wehrmacht. On the other hand the German were not willing to grant the Latvian Legion an independent command

- 1° they did not trust Latvians;
- 2° this might be interpreted as recognition of Latvia as a sovereign state.

Thus the expedient the formal subordination under a military organisation outside the Wehrmacht- and such was the Waffen SS.

As regards the conception of life and political creed the Legion had nothing in common with National-socialism. No member of the Latvian Legion has even been member of the National-socialist Party or of its numerous organisations, for this reason could not he belong to the Waffen SS either.

No member of the Legion had an SS number, contrary to the genuine members of the SS. There was no education or courses on national socialist lines or similar to such. As

generally known the Nazism and the Waffen SS renounced religion and Church. On the contrary the Church was highly in honour in the Legion. Each unit had its protestant or catholic padre.

It must be mentioned in addition that the formula of oath of the Latvian Legionaries was fundamentally different as compared to the formula of oath of the Waffen SS. The Latvian legionaries took their oath "in the name of God" and pledged obedience to the highest commander of the German Wehrmacht only in its strife against bolshevism /v. Annex 2/.

There were besides also purely outward differences between the Latvian Legion and the Waffen SS. The Latvian Legion were instead of SS badges their own national badges: either the old Latvian runes /19 Latv. Division/ or the badge of the former Latvian Army "the rising sun" /15. Latv. Division/. The Latvian legionaries were besides on their right upper arm Latvian national colours with the inscription "LATVIJA".

The Germans also repeatedly pointed out that we Latvians are no SS men, but only legionaries, or, as they were later called officially "Waffen-Grenadiere" in accordance with an order of the SS HQ the legionaries were even prohibited to wear the badges of the Waffen SS. Also the denomination of ranks of the Latvian Legion was different from that of the Waffen SS. Denominating the ranks of the genuine Waffen SS the letters SS always preceded the name of the rank, e.g. "SS Unterscharführer", "SS Hauptsturmführer" etc. On the contrary the name of the rank of a legionary was always preceded by the word "Legions": "Legions-Scharführer", "Legionsstandartenführer", afterwards "Waffen-Scharführer", "Waffenunterführer" etc /v. Annex 3/. At inner communication of the Latvian Legion the ranks were always denominated in accordance with the denomination of the former Latvian Army, e.g. pulkvedis - /Latvian for colonel/, Kapteinis /Latv. for captain/ etc. The members of the Latvian Legion were addressed by the members of the Wehrmacht also with the denomination of the rank in the Latvian Army, but not with that of the Waffen SS.

It was already in the second half of February of 1943 that the Commissary General of Latvia Dr. Drechsler had given orders to the Labour Boards to start preparations for conscription of the youths born 1919-1924. This order was based on the decree of the Minister for Occupied Territories as from 19.12.1941 regarding Universal direction to labour in the occupied Eastern countries. These 6 annual sets comprised a quota of 50.000 men. According to the decree of the German occupational power 25.000 of these conscripted men had to be enlisted into the German Wehrmacht as auxiliary volunteers /Hiwi = Hilfswillige/, 15.000 were to be enlisted into the Latvian Legion to be newly set up and 10.000 were to be directed to labour, mostly into the Organisation Todt.

On the part of Latvians a strong protest was submitted against these decrees issued in contradiction to the International Law in general; in particular objections were made against the inadequate compulsory quota to be conscripted. Nevertheless the occupational authorities insisted on the effectuation of this conscription in the form made out by these authorities.

Thereupon the Latvian institutions, in order to keep aloof from German war aims and in order to effectuate that the actions of the Latvian Legion were limited to the task of defending Latvia have propounded the following demands:

1. The Division to be set up is under command only of Latvian Officers. The Commandant is to be the Latvian retired General Bangerskis / a trusty Commander of the Latvian fusilier units in the Tsarist Russian Army in the I World War and several times Minister of War of former Latvian Republic / His Chief of Staff - Latvian Colonel Silgailis.
2. The conscription of the annual sets 1919-1924 is to be effected without compulsion regarding the enlistment for a special task.
3. The training is to take place in Latvia, it must last about 6 months and the Division may subordinate the Supreme command only as closed military unit.
4. Place of action - only the north section of the Eastern Front.

These demands were presented in writing by the Latvian organisations directly to the Reichskommissar for the Ostland Lohse on 23.2.43, avoiding the intermediary of the Commissary General for Latvia, Dr. Drechsel.

The Germans had no interest to have such a large military unit as a Division is, under purely Latvian command. It was their wish to see all higher commanding post occupied by German officers. The simple reason for this was that they did not trust Latvians.

They had nevertheless to comply with the Latvian demands except the compulsory quotas.

Meanwhile the Germans continued the preparatory work for the conscription to be.

In February 1943, by order of the SS HQ, a German SS Reserve Recruiting Depot / SS Ersatzkommando / under the management of the SS Standartenführer Hierthe had been set up. This Depot had to effectuate the conscription itself. Whereas this conscription was in principle against the clauses of the Hague Convention and in order to divest it of the outer form of a mobilization, the Labour Boards were charged with the enrolment. The conscription itself was being done by the SS Reserve Recruiting Depot. Thus the conscripted was officially given the possibility to choose the sort of enrolment himself. In fact only very few of the conscripted might have been granted the possibility of choice. The conscription for all 5 kinds of enrolment did not take place simultaneously, but by degrees / the conscription of these 5 annual sets were protracted till late autumn 1943 / and depended upon the kind and number of the enrolment required at the given moment. In cases when the choice of the kind of enlistment was possible the conscripted was not granted this possibility, he was enlisted by the recruiting board only on the strength of the fitness stated by the Recruiting board. In my opinion the 10,000 men to be called forward for civil labour were planned

only to camouflage the compulsory conscription these annual sets for purely military purposes. The enrolment began in the third decade of the month of March 1943. By 25.3.1943 the first 1000 men were mobilized and enlisted into the Legion. Immediately after their clothing and their taking the oath these men were sent without any training to the front near Leningrad. Only now the Latvians were informed that by order of the SS HQ besides the Division now in being another Latvian Brigade is to be set up. This is going to be done by way of disbandment of the 2. SS Brigade and by setting up a new Latvian brigade to replace it. For this purpose the Latvian Home Guard Battalions being already in action in the north section of this front reinforced by a reserve out of the conscripted 1919-1924 annual sets were to be used.

Simultaneously with the conscription of the annual sets of 1919-1924 there were mobilized also the necessary Officers of older annual sets. The mobilization of officers did not take place according to their belonging to consecutive annual sets, but individually, because also officers of higher ranks and consequently of higher age, than the annual sets fixed for mobilization were required. The setting up of the planned Latvian Division had to be put in effect by a German Staff for this purpose. But soon after the beginning of the drawing up it appeared that the SS HQ. was not inclined to entrust the command of this Division to Latvians. The setting up of the staff of the Division was cancelled and the German Staff charged with the setting up of the Division was appointed the staff of the Division. This new German deceit and the breach of the given promise that the mobilized man would be sent to the front only after a thorough training at home lasting 6 months /the sending into action of the untrained 1000 men on 30.3.1943/ had caused great indignation in all classes of the population, the consequences of which were difficult to assess.

After different combinations on the part of Germans the following way out was found. Basing on the prospect that Latvian Legion is going to consist in future not one division alone, but of one division and one brigade it appears necessary to have a Latvian Inspector - General who in such case without commanding power might inspect both Latvian units and bring to the knowledge of higher German commanding authorities the interests of the units. Then on 30.4.43 General Bangerakis, nominated to be the Commander of the division, was appointed Inspector General of the Latvian Legion. Although the Inspector General embodied the Legion, notwithstanding this the scope of his tasks remained in fact very limited and vague. Up to the day of capitulation of Germany he had not yet received any clearly outlined terms of reference.

Colonel Silgailis, the prospective I Staff Officer of the Division was appointed Leader of Infantry of the Division. The latter also, although officially recognized superior of all Latvians of the Division, had no commanding power and was in fact only liaison between the unit and the Commander of the Division on one side and the Unit and the Inspector General on the other. Since his appointment as Leader of the Infantry of the 15. Latvian Division the scope

of his official activity covers only the concerns of the Division till the date of 7.7.44 when he was transferred to the Inspection General as Chief of its Staff. Consequently I, Colonel Silgailis am not fully acquainted with the events at home and in the Staff of the Inspection General in that interval of time.

The setting up of the Division materialized relatively slowly. There was shortage of accommodation space, clothing, ammunition, and also of training personnel. The enlistment of the annual sets conscripted in March 1943 took place, as already mentioned, in degrees and protracted itself till late in autumn 1943. The Division was charged besides with the task of training of the reserve for the Latvian Brigade. As the loss of the Brigade in action and by desertion was very high in summer and autumn 1943, the Division had always to send the newly trained men to the Brigade. The result of this was that the Division after training during 6 months was itself not sufficiently trained and came into action not fully fitted out and because of this had great number of unnecessary casualties.

In addition to this I might state that during the training of the Division all its members were being tattooed, by order of the command of the Division, under the left armpit, with the signs of their blood-group. These tattoo marks are being regarded by Allied Authorities quite unfoundedly as a proof that the bearer belongs to the national-socialistic Waffen-SS. The tattooing has been administered as a preventive measure in cases of severe wounds requiring immediate transfusion of blood in circumstances not permitting a preliminary blood test. These tattooing were not administered to all units of the Division and to all troops of the Legion. Thus e.g. the Latvian Brigade /afterwards 19th Latvian Division/ which uninterruptedly was in action has not been tattooed at all. To my knowledge also the detained in concentration camps have been tattooed with signs of their blood groups.

When towards the end of 1943 the annual sets drafted in March were exhausted and the Eastern front had been withdrawn near the boundaries of Latvia the Commissary General, Dr. Drechsler, decreed a general mobilization.

The Inspector General of the Latvian Legion was commissioned with the technical execution of the mobilization. For this purpose an enrolment board denominated "Ersatzkommando Lettland" had been established. This enrolment board was directly subordinated under the Ersatzinspektion Ostland. The highest leader of the SS and Police for Ostland, Obergruppenführer und General der Polizei Jeckeln was Chief of the Ersatzinspektion Ostland; he controlled all matters regarding formation of Military reserves.

After protracted deliberation General Bangerskis accepted this responsible task.

He accepted it in order to protect his fellow-countrymen against encroachments of Germans. Owing to his intervention the Germans did not succeed to utilize the Latvian manpower for their desperate struggle up to 100%. The Inspector General did his best to brake the drafting. In autumn 1944 he refused to take part at any further draftings. This was the cause of repeated outbursts of rage on the part of German Authorities

/b. Annex 5/. The general aim of this work has always been to preserve Latvian men for his people and to bring about that the German commanding authorities involved into the struggle as few Latvians units as possible. This purpose was served also by the setting up near Thorn of a Reserve Depot /mentioned below/ which had to prevent the Latvians displaced to Germany to be sent to the front. No doubt that he would have been removed from his post by the Germans and imprisoned into a concentration camp if they had not to consider the personal popularity of general Bangerakis with the people.

I am not familiar with the details of the execution of draftings, as I was at the front. I know only as much that in winter 1943/44. when the centre of gravity of the struggle at the eastern front moved to the north section of this front and the Germans were compelled to withdraw their front from Leningrad and Staraja Russa a great excitement spread through Latvia as a result of this a conscription of several annual sets was decreed with the purpose of setting up of Latvian Frontier Guard Regiments to be charged with the task to defend the frontiers of Latvia. But shortly after their formation the Frontier Guard Regiments were disbanded and their manpower transferred as reserve to the troops at the front. I cannot remember which annual sets were mobilized for this purpose. Anyhow among them were persons of rather advanced age. As much as I can recollect there were drafted officers born 1884 and after and former n.c.o.'s. born 1892 and after. These conscriptions for the defence of frontiers in spring 1944 were the last mass conscriptions. Although in 1944 were drafted the annual sets 1925-1926 were drafted as reserve for the 15th Latvian Division.

In spring 1944 the Latvian Brigade was transformed into a division similar to the already existing 15 Latv. Division and received the number 19. The official denominations of this Latvian Divisions were now:

"15 or 19 Waffen Grenadier Division der SS".

During the severe battle of retreat in July 1944 the 15 Latvian Division had very great number of casualties, with the result that it had to be withdrawn from the front. For the purpose of its replenishment and retraining it was transferred to the drill ground Westprussia in Germany. This Division was not yet sufficiently trained and equipped when it was again sent to the front to frustrate the Russian advance from Danzig in January 1945. It was with many casualties that the Division succeeded after heavy retreating fights in West-Prussia and in Pommern near Swinemünde to evade the Russian encirclement. Thanks to recommendations of the Inspection General the Division as not being fit for battle, was sent to trench building near Neustrelitz. Only one Regiment of this Division has been made somehow fit for battle and on 19.4.1945 ordered to march to the defence of Berlin. After having got the order to occupy a defending position to the east of Berlin this Division did not comply with the order but marched on her own account to the west in order to surrender to the Allied Western Powers. Although they were pursued by Germans the Regiment succeeded on 27.4.1945 to reach American front line at Magdeburg and voluntary to

surrender their arms. The remaining units of the 15. Division also began on their own account in the end of April a march to the west and surrendered to the Western Allies in the vicinity of Schwerin.

The 19. Latv. Division remained in action in Courland /Latvia/ till the capitulation of Germany. I am not informed about its fate after that.

As regards the fate of the police battalions I mentioned above, some of them were already in Spring 1943 embodied into the Latvian Brigade as skeleton units. Later also some individual battalions were returned, thanks to mediation of Inspector General of the Latvian Legion, from the front to their home country. From the remainder there were set up 3 Police Regiments, they came to the front individually and were subordinated to German Units. Their remnants were transferred to Germany in autumn 1944. The younger men were sent to reserve depots for trench digging work, but the older were discharged as unfit for military service.

All remnants of different units transferred to Germany were sent to Reserve depot which began to build trenches in the area of Thorn. They were organized in construction regiments /Bauregiment/. The skeleton of these regiments consisted of construction battalions set up in August/September 1944 in Latvia out of inmates of concentration camps and prisons. They were mostly deserters of different units of the Legion. In such manner more than 4000 were enrolled /v. Annexes 6, 7 and 8/. During the Russian offensive in January 1945 the Field Reserve Depot was withdrawn to the area of Stettin and again charged with construction of trenches. From there by the end of April 1945 these Regiments began their retreat to the west and surrendered voluntarily to the Allied Western Powers in the area of Schwerin and Wismar.

Besides that in August 1944 these Latvian men who were formerly found fit for work only /"av" - arbeitsverwendbar/ or conditionally fit for service /"b k v" bedingt kriegsverwendbar/ were now being drafted as ancillary personnel of the Air Force /Kampfhelfer der Luftwaffe/. All these men were transported to Germany and enlisted in the Air Force as ground personnel for airfields.

In addition to that it must be pointed out that besides the already mentioned units belonging to the Legion the Latvian male youth born 1927 was drafted in August/September 1944 as ancillary personnel for the Air Force. These youths were not drafted by the District Recruiting Boards under control of the Inspector General of the Latv. Legion. I cannot remember who has effected the drafting and who has decreed it.

As regards the Staff of the Inspection General, itself, it was transferred to Danzig in October 1944. There remained in Courland only a small working staff of the Inspection General up till the German capitulation. On April 29, 1945 the Inspector General issued his last order of the day which proclaimed the disbandment of the Latvian Legion and commanded to the units to surrender to the Western Allies, who have always been friendly towards the Latvian people.

As regards the activity of the Inspector General since the 2nd half of summer 1944, he has had, as soon as the German retreat from Latvia began, very little to do with his

military tasks. From that moment when the whole civil administrative organisation in Latvia broke down, his activity was devoted for the most part to the civilian sector and much less to the military one. He took over, on his own account, the protection of the Latvian civil population, of the unhappy refugees, and displaced persons, frustrated their enlistment in many compulsory arrangements of Germans not only in Latvia but also in Germany e.g. the compulsory enrolment of displaced Latvians into the Volksturm /v. Annex 9./ The tasks the Inspection General was to perform now were so manifold that it would be too prolix to enumerate all of them in this report. The liberation of Latvians detained in concentration camps in Latvia and Germany was regarded by the Inspector General as his main task. By this energetic interference very many Latvians were saved from death and concentration camps.

This is in short the description of the Latvian activity in the 2. World War in actions against the Soviet Union, which last had deprived Latvia of its independence and the Latvian people of its freedom. The struggle of Latvian people began already in a time when the Soviet-Union was not yet an ally of the Western Powers. In the opinion of Latvians this was only a just struggle to regain the independence of Latvia. It is one of the greatest misunderstandings of our time that this struggle for the freedom of the native country is being put in connection with a struggle for the national-socialistic aims of Germany.

Gambrisk 12.2.1949
Saulos Str. 85

/Signed/

A. Silgailis
Colonel of the former
Latvian Army and former
Chief of Staff of the
Latvian Legion